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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000438

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: EDUCATION MINISTER ARRESTED FOR CORRUPTION

1. On May 17 President Bingu wa Mutharika fired Education Minister Yusuf Mwawa after Mwawa was charged with using government funds for his own wedding reception. Earlier that day, Mwawa was arrested and charged on four counts: theft by a public servant, forgery, altering an official document, and misuse of public office. Mwawa, who has denied the charges, allegedly used a check meant for a cancelled official meeting to pay for the \$1,700 wedding reception at a hotel in Blantyre, Malawi's commercial capital. He was granted bail and released on the same day. His wife, who works for the Vice President's press office, was present at the court.

2. COMMENT: This marks the first time that a sitting Malawian government minister has been arrested for corruption, and it sends a strong message about the president's zero-tolerance stance on corruption. There is, however, a political aspect to the case. Mwawa, a political holdover from the Muluzi administration, was from day one an unlikely Mutharika ally. Prior to the arrest, rumors abounded that charging Mwawa would open a can of worms about previously unreported corruption allegations in the Education Ministry. Mwawa, now with nothing to lose, may be more willing to discuss the details, and in all likelihood will seek retribution on his now-former boss.
GILMOUR